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5. FIRST RECORD OF MERLIN *FALCO COLUMBARIUS PALLIDUS* FROM MAHARASHTRA, INDIA

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The Merlin *Falco columbarius* was first described by Linnaeus in 1758. The Merlin is a rare bird in India (Grimmett *et al.* 1998) and a rare winter migrant to north India (Naoroji 2006), but is classed globally as Least Concern (BirdLife International 2001).

There are two races of this species occurring in India: *insignis* and *pallidus* (Naoroji 2006). Both the races are rare winter visitors to northern India, specifically Jammu and Kashmir, Punjab, Rajasthan, Haryana, Gujarat, and Arunachal Pradesh (Naoroji 2006). Race *pallidus* is rarer than *insignis* (Naoroji 2006), reported as winter visitor to Jammu and Kashmir, passage migrant and scarce winter visitor to western and central Ladakh (Meinertzhagen 1927; Williams and Delany 1986; Mallon, 1987). It was observed in late August 2000 in the Nubra valley near Diskit on Hunda road and in Changthang between Demchok and Fukche in mid-August 2002 (Naoroji and Sangha 2004).

Little is known about the Merlin in the Subcontinent, except its famous hunting methods (Naoroji 2006). It has been described as a bold and dashing falcon inhabiting open country habitats (Grimmett *et al.* 1998).

We report here sighting of the Merlin, race *pallidus* (immature female), in an uninhabited open country just outside Bhimashankar Wildlife Sanctuary in Maharashtra.

We were birding around that area on February 16, 2007, at 0930 hrs, and came across a small raptor perched on an electric pole, overlooking open scrub vegetation and a rocky terrain. We mistook the bird for a Common Kestrel, till we noticed a pale collar on the hind neck and buff bars on the uppertail. We noticed it scanning the area, sometimes bobbing the head up and down, disturbed by our presence it shifted its perch and flew to another electric pole.

The habitat here was mostly scrub vegetation, there were many rocks and a few clumps of grass. There were electric wires over this patch of open land, which served as a perch for many birds of prey.

This is the first record of the Merlin from Maharashtra. We can only speculate whether it was a vagrant, a passage migrant or a resident. But it is sure that some sincere work needs to be done on the raptors of Bhimashankar to ensure their long term survival.

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